

March 10, 2010

The Hon. Bev Oda
Minister for International Relations
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
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RE: A call to restore funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and to address the blockade on Gaza

Dear Minister Oda,

We write to you as churches concerned about the plight of the Palestinian people, especially refugees and those living under the blockade in Gaza.

With heavy hearts, we learned of the Canadian government's decision to cut its annual \$15 million general contribution in support of UNRWA's efforts to provide emergency support, education, healthcare and other services to the 4.67 million registered Palestinian refugees living in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and to redirect its contribution to UNRWA to food aid. Canadian churches have worked with Palestinian Christian partners in the region for more than three decades. Some of our partners work with Palestinian refugees. They have told us of the crucial role that UNRWA plays as the major provider of education and medical care in the refugee camps.

UNRWA currently suffers funding shortfalls, despite generous contributions from other countries. The agency says it "has been forced to implement austerity measures over the last few years due to lack of funds. Financial contributions have not increased sufficiently to keep pace with inflation and a rising refugee population. This has resulted in a reduction in services as is evident in the fact that average annual spending per refugee has fallen from about \$200 in 1975 to about \$110 today."¹

In light of this, we seek to understand the basis for this decision by CIDA. Did CIDA consult with UNRWA, other donors and with the Palestinian National Authority before making this decision? Is the focus on food aid a short-term priority? What impact will CIDA's decision to redirect its funds have on UNRWA's capacity to deliver vital educational and health care services?

1.4 million people living in Gaza continue to suffer under the blockade. On January 20th 2010, UN agencies and the Association for International Development Agencies, which represents 80 NGOs, called for the immediate opening of Gaza's crossings. They said, "The continuing closure of the Gaza Strip is undermining the functioning of the health care system and putting at risk the health of 1.4 million people in Gaza. It is causing on-going deterioration in the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. It is hampering the provision of medical supplies and the training of health staff and it is preventing patients with serious medical conditions getting timely specialised treatment outside Gaza".²

We continue to pray and to support efforts that will lead to peace and justice between Israel and Palestine. We are concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Under

¹ <http://unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=87> retrieved February 18, 2010

² "Call for immediate opening of Gaza Strip crossings - Press statement by UN agencies and AIDA", <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/FBUO-7ZVKHM?OpenDocument>

what conditions would the Government of Canada recommend to the Government of Israel that it lift the blockade on Gaza?

We look forward to your response to the issues we have raised in this letter.

In Faith,



+Fred Hiltz
Archbishop and Primate
The Anglican Church of Canada



Merrill Stewart
Clerk
Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers)



The Rev. Susan C. Johnson
National Bishop
The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada



The Rev. Dr. Richard Fee
General-Secretary, Life and Mission Agency
The Presbyterian Church in Canada



Rev. Bruce Gregersen
General Council Officer, Programs
The United Church of Canada

c.c.:

The Right Hon. Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada

The Hon. Lawrence Cannon
Minister for Foreign Affairs

The Hon. Michael Ignatieff
Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition

The Hon. Gilles Duceppe
Leader of the Bloc Québécois

The Hon. Jack Layton
Leader of the New Democratic Party

Johanne Deschamps
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Glen Pearson
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John Rafferty
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Paul Dewar
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Francine Lalonde
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The Hon. Bob Rae
Foreign Affairs Critic
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